

Community Schools Testimony

House Education Committee

February 15, 2023

Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today about our work in utilizing the Community Schools grant. I am Elaine Collins, the superintendent for North Country Supervisory Union and have spent the last 33 years working in Vermont schools. With me today is Samantha Stevens, North Country Supervisory Union's Community Schools Coordinator. As your committee considers how much support to provide for this kind of work in our schools, or whether to continue funding at all based on the success of the work so far, it's important that you understand our context.

North Country Supervisory Union has 12 educational sites: Brighton Elementary School, Charleston Elementary School, Coventry Village School, Derby Elementary School, Jay-Westfield Elementary School, Lowell Graded School, Newport City Elementary School, Newport Town School, North Country Career Center, North Country Union High School, North Country Junior High School, and Troy School and we have about 2600 students. Our supervisory union spans almost 400 square miles, and reaches 65 miles from one end to another. We have not unified, which means that each of our 12 sites is individually governed, with individual budgets and individual systems of support for our students. When NCSU applied for the Community Schools grant, we did so as an SU, which was different than many of the other applicants. We did so because of the unique nature of our work across such a large geographical area and the need to provide support for our schools, especially our smaller, more rural schools. We view our

supervisory union structure as a “force multiplier”: we can provide resources and supports at the SU-level that many of our smaller schools couldn’t afford on their own. Things like behavior specialists, neurodevelopmental team specialists, academic and SEL coaches, early childhood programming, ENCORE, and a community schools coordinator and team help to coordinate and provide on-the-ground support for some of our most challenging students and their families.

As you already know, our jobs in education are becoming increasingly difficult. The effects of drug addiction, trauma, and other societal issues are creating pressure on schools. The world is a different place than it was even ten years ago, and it’s affecting our children. Our ability to educate children depends on our ability to provide for needs that our students have. We have an alarming number of students who are experiencing mental health crises, trauma (either in the past or ongoing), challenges with emotional regulation, behavioral challenges, food insecurities and housing insecurities.

At the same time, our community’s resources are dwindling: the Department of Children and Families, our designated mental health agency, and other area agencies are struggling to keep positions funded or filled. When we refer a student to receive outside mental health services, we often are told it may be many months or even years for that student to receive the help that they may need immediately. When some families with children may be living in tents or campers, we are often told by area agencies there are no other options for housing. But kids show up every day at our schools and we can’t say we don’t have resources.

Subsequently, this puts more pressure on schools to become quasi-social service agencies responsible to provide mental health supports and to provide for the basic needs of students because they likely won't get these needs met anywhere else. There's a practical aspect to this: often when we have students who are in crisis, they become explosive, and no one learns. Because of this, we must have positions that were unheard of even ten years ago, like behavior specialists, behavior team assistants, school psychologists, home-to-school coordinators, guidance counselors, resolution room managers, school-based clinicians, social-emotional learning coaches, and yes – a community schools coordinator and her team – to help mitigate these challenging situations and circumstances. All of this comes at a cost, but in our new reality, these are necessary costs that are required to allow all students to access their education.

Across our SU, about 50% of our students qualify for free or reduced hot lunch. Some schools have a poverty index as high as 80% while others have lower amounts. Additionally, about 26% of our students qualify for special education or 504 accommodations. Think about a student who is deemed homeless, is living in poverty, may not have enough to eat, and has one or both parents who are struggling with addiction. Often this child doesn't come to school ready to learn. She may need food, clothes, and nurturing to be ready to access her education. That child's everyday reality is much different than a child who has a stable home environment where all her basic needs are met. Because we have many more students who contend with many of these issues, our system must be responsive to meet those needs. And these supports come at a cost.

Oh and let's talk about COVID. COVID created new issues but has also become a "problem amplifier" . . . mental health issues, food and housing insecurities, trauma, domestic violence, substance abuse have all become bigger problems since COVID. And attendance. Or lack thereof. Some families who were feeling disengaged or disconnected from school before COVID have almost entirely given up on school. More and more, we see students with 100 or more absences in a school year. When this happens for multiple years, it is likely those students will never fully recover academically. DCF and the court system are the only ones with teeth in this fight against chronic absenteeism, and are overwhelmed with bigger problems, so schools are left to figure this out. Our school-based home-to-school coordinators and our SU-based Community Schools team are essential to this work. Additionally, food and housing insecurities abound. Providing weekly food delivered and connecting families to area resources - when available - has become the work of our Community Schools team.

We hear a lot about the increasing cost of educating fewer children in our communities and state. When thinking about Community Schools work, or really about any funding for schools, please consider two things: the ever-expanding mission and responsibilities of schools and the ultimate human cost if we don't do this work for our children and their families.